

Confession



Lev Tolstoy

Confession - by Lev Tolstoy

Chapter 1

I was baptized and brought up in the Orthodox Christian faith. I was instructed in it both as a child and throughout my boyhood and youth. But when at the age of eighteen I left university in my second year, I no longer believed in any of the things I had been taught.

Judging from various memories, I had never believed very seriously but had merely trusted in what I was taught and in what was professed by my elders; but this trust was very unstable.

I remember when I was eleven years old a high school boy named Volodya, now long since dead, came to see us one Sunday and announced the latest discovery made at school. The discovery was that there is no God and that everything we were being taught was just invention (this was in 1838). I remember my older brothers got interested in this news and even called me to join in the discussion. We all, I remember, became very excited and took the news as something very interesting and entirely possible.

I remember too that when my older brother Dmitri, who was then at university, suddenly and with impulsiveness natural to his character embraced the faith and started to attend all the services, to follow the fasts and to lead a pure and moral life, that we all, including the older ones, constantly made fun of him and for some reason nicknamed him Noah. And I remember when Musin-Pushkin, at the time a curator at the University of Kazan, invited us to a ball and jokingly persuaded my brother, who had declined the invitation, that even David danced before the ark. At the time I used to relate to these jokes of my elders, and from them I drew the conclusion that it is necessary to learn the Catechism and it is necessary to go to church, but that one need not take it all too seriously. I also recall reading Voltaire when I was very young; I not only failed to be shocked by his humour but even found it quite amusing.

The decline of my faith occurred in the way in which it has always happened, and still happens, among people of our level of education. It seems to me that

in the majority of cases it happens like this: people live as everyone lives, they all live based on principles which not only have nothing in common with religion but are, for the most part, contrary to them; religion plays no part in their life, they never come across it in their relations with others and never have to deal with it in their own lives. Religion is professed somewhere, away from life and independent of it. If we encounter it, it is only as an external phenomenon, disconnected from life.

Now, just as then, it is impossible to judge from a person's life, or behaviour, whether or not he is a believer. If there is a difference between those who openly profess Orthodoxy and those who deny it, then it is not to the advantage of the former. Nowadays, as before, the public declaration and profession of Orthodoxy is usually encountered among dull-witted, cruel and immoral people who tend to consider themselves very important. Whereas intelligence, honesty, straight forwardness, good-naturedness and morality are qualities usually found among people who claim to be non-believers.

The Catechism is taught in schools and the pupils are sent to church; officials are required to produce evidences of having received communion. But a person belonging to our circle, who is no longer at school and has not entered into public service, can live for dozens of years without once remembering that he is living among Christians and is himself considered to be professing the Christian Orthodox faith.

Thus today, just as in earlier times, religious teaching, which is accepted on trust and sustained by external pressure, gradually weakens under the influence of knowledge and experiences of life that are opposite to the religious doctrine; a person can go on living for a long time imagining that the religious teaching given to him as a child is still intact, whereas it has in fact disappeared without leaving a trace.

An intelligent and honest man by the name of S. told me the story of how he lost his faith. At the age of twenty-six, while staying overnight while out hunting, he followed an old childhood custom of kneeling down to pray in the evening. His elder brother, who was hunting with him, lay on some straw watching him. When S. had finished and was preparing to lie down his

brother said to him: 'Do you still do that?' Nothing more was said between them. But from that day on S. stopped saying his prayers and going to church. And for thirty years he has not prayed, has not taken communion and has not been in a church. And this is not because he knew his brother's convictions and wanted to share them, nor was it because he had resolved something in his heart, but simply because this comment of his brother's was like a finger being pushed against a wall ready to fall under its own weight. These words indicated that the place where he had thought faith to be had long been empty and that the words he uttered, crossing himself, and the bows he made in prayer, were essentially meaningless actions. Having recognized their meaninglessness he could no longer continue doing them.

Thus it has happened and still happens, I believe, with the great majority of people. I am speaking about people from our type of background, of people who are sincere with themselves, and not of those who use the profession of faith as a means of obtaining some kind of worldly aims. (These people are the most stagnant non-believers, for if faith for them is a means of attaining some worldly goals, then that is certainly not faith.) People of our education level find themselves in a situation where the light of knowledge and of life have melted away the artificial edifice, and they have either noticed this and cleared the space, or haven't yet noticed it.

The belief instilled from childhood, in me, as in others, since childhood have disappeared, with the only difference that because from very early age I began to read a lot and think, my conscious abandonment of religious faith happened very early. From the age of sixteen I ceased saying my prayers, and of my own volition stopped going to church and fasting. I stopped believing in what I had been taught as a child; but I did believe in something. What I did believe in I couldn't possibly have said. I believed in God, or rather I did not deny God, but what kind of God I could not have said; neither did I reject Christ or his teaching, but what was the essence of his teaching again I could not have said.

Now, looking back at that time, I can clearly see that the only real faith I had, apart from the animal instincts driving my life, was a belief in self-perfection. But what this perfection consisted of, and what its aim was, were unclear to

me. I tried to perfect myself intellectually and studied everything I could and everything life thrust in front of me. I tried to perfect my will, setting myself rules I tried to follow. I perfected myself physically, practising all kinds of exercises in order to develop my strength and dexterity, and I cultivated endurance and patience by undergoing all kinds of hardship. All this I regarded as self-improvement. The beginning of it all was, of course, moral perfection, but this was soon replaced by a belief in general perfection, that is a desire to be better not in my own eyes or before God but in the eyes of other people. And very soon this determination to be better than others became a wish to be more powerful than others: more famous, more important and wealthy.

Chapter 2

Some day I will tell the story of my life, touching and instructive at the same time, for those ten years of my youth. I think a great many people must have experienced something similar. I longed with all my soul to be good, but I was young; I had passions and I was alone, completely alone in my search for goodness. Every time I tried to express my innermost desires – a wish to be morally good – I met with contempt and scorn, and as soon as I gave in to vile passions I was praised and encouraged. Ambition, lust for power, self-interest, lechery, pride, anger, revenge, were all respected qualities. As I yielded to these passions I became like my elders and I felt that they were pleased with me. A dear old aunt of mine, the purest of creatures, with whom I lived, was always saying that she wished for nothing as much as that I would have a relationship with a married woman. ‘Rien ne forme un jeune homme comme une liaison avec une femme comme il faut.’ Another happiness she wished for me was that I should become an adjutant, and preferably to the Emperor. And the greatest happiness of all would be for me to marry a very rich girl and acquire as many serfs as possible through the marriage.

I cannot recall those years without horror, loathing, and heartache. I was killed people in war, summoned others to duels in order to kill them, gambled at cards; I devoured the fruits of the peasant’s labor and punished them; I fornicated and practised deceit. Lying, thieving, promiscuity of all kinds, drunkenness, violence, murder... there was not a crime I did not commit, and yet I was praised for it all and my contemporaries considered, and still consider me, a relatively moral man.

For ten years I lived in this fashion.

During this time I began to write out of vanity, self-interest and pride. In my writings I did the same as I did in life. In order to achieve the fame and money for which I wrote I had to conceal what was good in myself and display what was bad. And this is what I did. Time and again I would contrive in my writings to conceal under the guise of indifference, or even of

light-heartedness, those strivings for goodness which lent meaning to my life. And I succeeded and was praised.

After the war, by which time I was twenty-six, I returned to St Petersburg and made the acquaintance of writers. They accepted me as one of them and flattered me. In no time, I had assimilated the view of life held by the group of writers with whom I mixed, and before long all my earlier attempts at improvement had been erased. These views provided a theory that justified my dissolute life.

The view of life adopted by these people, my literary associates, was that generally speaking life is a process of development in the course of which the most important role is played by us, the thinkers; and that among the thinkers it is we, the artists and poets, who have the most influence. Our vocation is to educate people. In order to avoid being confronted by the obvious question – ‘What do I know and what have I got to teach?’ – their theory explained that it is not necessary to know this and that the poet and the artist teach unconsciously. I was considered a superb artist and poet and it was therefore quite natural for me to adopt this theory. I, an artist and poet, wrote without knowing myself what it was I was teaching. And I was paid money for doing this. I had fine food, a place, women, society; I had fame. It must then be the case that what I was teaching was very good.

This faith in the value of poetry and in the development of life was a religion and I was one of its priests. It was very profitable and pleasant to be one of its priests, and for a considerable length of time I lived in this faith without ever doubting its validity. But in the second, and still more in the third year of this existence, I began to doubt its infallibility and began to examine it. The first point of doubt was that I had begun to notice how the priests of this religion disagreed among themselves. Some said: ‘We are the finest and most useful teachers and it is we who teach what is needed, while the others teach falsely.’ And others said: ‘No! We are the real teachers and you teach falsely!’ They argued, quarrelled, deceived and tricked one another. Moreover, there were many among us who were unconcerned as to who was right and who wrong, but who simply achieved their own selfish ends by means of this activity of ours. All this forced me to doubt the truthfulness of

our faith.

Furthermore, once I had begun to doubt the truth of this writer's religion I started observing its priests more closely and became convinced that almost all the priests of this faith – the writers – were immoral men, the majority of bad and worthless in character and much inferior to the people I had met during my former dissipated and military life. But they were complacent and self-satisfied in a way that is only possible for people who are truly holy, or for those who do not know what holiness is. These people became repugnant to me, and I became repugnant to myself, and realized that the religion was a deception.

But strangely enough, even though the utter falsehood of this creed was something I came quickly to understand and to reject, I did not renounce the status these people had given me: that of artist, poet and teacher. I naïvely imagined that I was a poet and an artist, and could teach everybody without myself knowing what I was teaching. And this is what I did.

From my association with these people I took away a new vice: an unhealthily developed pride, and an insane conviction that I was called to teach people without knowing myself what I was teaching.

Now, when I think about this time and about my state of mind and the state of mind of those people (and incidentally there are thousands of them nowadays), I feel it's pitiful and frightening and absurd - there comes just the feeling you get in a madhouse.

We were all convinced back then that we must talk and talk and write and publish - as quickly as possible, and as much as possible, and that this was all necessary for the good of mankind. And thousands of us, contradicting and criticizing one another, published and wrote with the aim of teaching others. Failing to notice that we ourselves knew nothing, that we did not know the answer to the most basic question of life – what is good and what is evil – we all without listening to each other spoke at once, sometimes indulging each other and praising each other, so that I too was indulged and praised; sometimes getting angry and shouting each other down, just like in a

madhouse.

Thousands of workmen worked to the limits of their strength day and night, setting type and printing millions of words, and the mail took them all over Russia, and we kept teaching, teaching, teaching more and more and never were able to finish teaching everything and kept getting angry that we weren't listened to very much.

All horribly strange, but now I understand it. Our real heartfelt reasoning was that we wanted to get as much money and praise as we could. To achieve that aim we could do nothing else but write books and newspapers. So we did that. But in order for us to do such useless work and have the certainty that we were very important people, we needed another piece of reasoning that would justify our activity. And so we thought up the following: everything that exists is reasonable. Everything that exists goes on developing. It goes on developing through education. Education is measured by the dissemination of books and newspapers. And we are paid money and respected because we write books and newspapers, and so we are very useful and good people. This reasoning would have been very good if we had all agreed; but since for every thought pronounced by one there always appeared a thought, diametrically opposite, pronounced by another, that should have made us think again. But we didn't notice that. We were paid money, and people of our persuasion praised us—so we, each one of us, thought ourselves right.

It is now clear to me that this was no different than a madhouse; I only dimly suspected this then and simply, like all insane people, called everyone insane except myself.

Chapter 3

And so I lived, giving myself to this madness, for another six years until I married. During this period I traveled abroad. Life in Europe and the contact I had with advanced and learned Europeans still further reinforced the belief in overall perfection, by which I lived; for I found the same belief among them. This belief took in me the usual form it has in the majority of educated people of our time. The belief was expressed in the word “progress”. At the time I felt that this word had some meaning. I didn’t yet understand that, tormented like every living man by questions of “How can I live better?,” in answering, “Live in conformity with progress,” I was saying exactly what a man, carried along in a boat by the waves and the wind, will say to the captain when the only question facing him is “Where should I steer for?” if he says without answering the question, “We are being carried along somewhere.”

I didn’t see that then. Only from time to time not my reason but my feelings revolted against this generally prevalent superstition with which people nowadays conceal their lack of understanding of life. Thus during my stay in Paris the sight of an execution disclosed to me the shaky foundations of my superstitious belief in progress. When I saw the head parted from the body and both head and body separately falling noisily into the bin, then I understood—not with my mind but with my whole being—that no theories of the rationality of existence and progress could justify this act, and if all the people of the world, from the world’s creation, according to whatever theories, were to find that this is necessary—I knew that it was not necessary, that it was wrong, and that therefore the judge of what is good and necessary is not what people say and do, but I myself and my heart. Another occasion of the inadequacy of the superstition of progress was the death of my brother. A smart, kind, serious man, he fell ill while still young, suffered for more than a year, and died in agony, without understanding why he had lived and understanding still less why he was dying. No theories could give any answer to these questions either for me or for him during the time of his slow and agonizing dying.

But these were only infrequent occasions of doubt; in reality I continued to

live only professing my belief in progress. “Everything is evolving and I am evolving, and why I am evolving together with everyone else will one day be apparent.” This is how I would have formulated my belief at the time.

When I returned from abroad I settled in the country and got occupied with peasant schools. This occupation was particularly to my liking because it contained none of those lies now obvious to me that had already so struck me in the business of literary education. Here too I was acting in the name of progress, but by now I was treating progress itself critically. I told myself that progress in some of its manifestations was carried out wrongly and that here I had to treat primitive people, peasant children, quite freely, letting them choose whatever path to progress they wished to take.

In reality I kept circling around one insoluble problem—to teach without knowing what. In the higher spheres of literary activity it was clear to me that I should not teach without knowing what, because I saw that all of them taught different things and only concealed their ignorance from one another by disputes; here, with the peasant children, I thought that I could get around this difficulty by letting the children study what they wanted. Now I find it ridiculous remembering how I prevaricated in trying to carry out my whim of teaching, although I knew very well in the depths of my heart that I could teach nothing of what should be taught, because I myself did not know what should be taught. After a year spent in school activities, I went abroad a second time to learn there how I could manage to be able to teach others while knowing nothing myself.

And I thought I had learned this abroad and, equipped with this wisdom, I returned to Russia in the year of the Emancipation of the peasants. I took up the position of arbitrator and started teaching the uneducated people in the schools, as well as the educated people through the journal I had begun publishing. This seemed to be going well, but I felt that my mental state was not altogether healthy and that this couldn’t continue for long. And then perhaps I would have come to that despair I came to at the age of fifty if I hadn’t had another side of life that I hadn’t yet experienced and which promised me salvation: that was family life.

For a year I worked with arbitration, the schools, and the journal and I became so exhausted, in particular from my confusion, and so burdensome did I find the struggle over arbitration, so muddled seemed my school activity, so repugnant became my role in the journal, which always consisted of the same thing — my desire to teach everyone and conceal the fact that I didn't know what to teach — that I became ill, more in mind than body, dropped everything, and went off into the steppe to the Bashkirs to breathe air, drink koumiss and live a mere animal life.

When I returned, I married. The new conditions of a happy family life now completely diverted me from any search for the general meaning of life. During this time my life was focused on the family, on my wife, on my children, and thus in concerns for improving our means of living. My personal aspiration for self-perfection, which had already been replaced by an aspiration to perfection in general, that is for progress was now directly replaced by an aspiration to the best possible life for myself and my family.

So fifteen more years went by.

In spite of the fact that I considered writing to be nonsense, during those fifteen years I still went on writing. I had already tasted the temptation of writing, the temptation of huge monetary reward and applause for worthless work, and I gave myself up to it as a means to better my material position and suppress in my soul all questions about the meaning of my own life and of life in general.

I wrote, teaching what for me was the only truth: that one should live so that life for oneself and one's family was the best possible.

So I lived, but five years ago something very strange started to happen to me: there started to come over me moments at first of bewilderment, of life stopping as if I didn't know how to live or what to do, and I felt lost and fell into despair. But this passed and I went on living as before. Then these moments of bewilderment began to be repeated more and more frequently and always in the same form. These moments of life coming to a halt were always expressed in the very same questions: Why? Well, and then what?

At first I thought that these were just pointless, irrelevant questions. I thought all this was known and that if and when I wanted to take up finding the answers, it wouldn't be much work for me—it was only that now I didn't have the time to do that, but when I put my mind to it, I would find the answers. But the questions repeated themselves more and more frequently, demanding answers more and more insistently; and like spots of ink that keep falling into one place, all these questions without answers merged into a single black stain.

There happened what happens to everyone who falls ill with a mortal internal disease. At first there appear some insignificant symptoms of indisposition to which the sick man pays no attention, then these symptoms recur more and more often and merge into one continuous suffering. The suffering grows and before the sick man has time to look around, he recognizes that what he took for indisposition is the thing that is for him more important than anything in the world, that it is death.

This is just what happened to me. I understood that this was no casual indisposition but something very important, and that if these same questions kept on being repeated, then they would have to be answered. And I tried to answer. The questions seemed such stupid, simple, childish questions. But as soon as I touched upon them and tried to resolve them, I was immediately convinced, firstly, that these were not childish and stupid questions but the most important and profound questions in life, and secondly, that I could not, just could not answer them, however much I thought about it. Before occupying myself with the Samara estate, the upbringing of my son, the writing of a book, I had to know why I would be doing that. As long as I didn't know why, I couldn't do anything. As I thought about estate management, which engaged me a lot at that time, there would suddenly come into my head the question: "Very well, you'll have sixteen thousand acres in the province of Samara, and three hundred horses, and then what?" I was completely thrown and didn't know what more to think. Or starting to think about how I was educating my children, I would say to myself, "Why?" Or considering how the welfare of the people might be achieved, I suddenly would say to myself, "But what's it to do with me?" Or thinking about the fame my works would bring me, I would say to myself, "Very well, you'll be

more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, than all the writers in the world—so what?” And I couldn’t answer anything, anything at all. Such questions do not wait, you need to answer them at the moment; if you do not answer – you cannot live. But there was no answer.

Chapter 4

My life came to a standstill. I could breathe, eat, drink and sleep and I could not help breathing, eating, drinking and sleeping; but there was no life in me because I had no desires whose gratification I would have deemed it reasonable to fulfill. If I wanted something I knew in advance that whether or not I satisfied my desire nothing would come of it. If a magician had come and offered to grant my wishes I would not have known what to say. If in my intoxicated moments I still had the habit of desire, rather than real desire, in my sober moments I knew that it was a delusion and that there was nothing to desire. I could not even wish to know the truth because I guessed what the truth was. The truth was that life is meaningless.

It was as if I had carried on living and walking until I reached a precipice from which I could see clearly that there was nothing ahead of me other than destruction. But it was impossible to stop, and impossible to turn back or close my eyes in order not to see that there was nothing ahead other than deception of life and of happiness, and the reality of suffering and death: of complete annihilation.

Thus I, a healthy and a happy man, was brought to feel that I could live no longer, - an insuperable force drew me toward somehow ridding myself of life. I cannot say that I wanted to kill myself.

The force that drew me away from life was stronger, fuller, and concerned with far wider consequences than any mere wish. It was a force like the earlier urge toward life, only in the opposite direction. I strove to move away from life with all my might. The thought of suicide now came to me as naturally as thoughts of improving my life had previously come to me. This idea was so attractive to me that I had to use cunning against myself in order to avoid carrying it out too hastily. I did not want to rush, simply because I wanted to make every effort to unravel the matter. I told myself that if I could not unravel the matter now, I still had time to do so. And it was at this time that I, a fortunate man, removed a rope from my room where I undressed every night alone, lest I hang myself from the beam between the cupboards;

and I gave up taking a rifle with me on hunting trips so as not to be tempted to end my life in such an all too easy fashion. I myself did not know what I wanted. I was afraid of life and strove against it, yet I still hoped for something from it.

All this was happening to me at a time when I was surrounded on all sides by what is considered complete happiness: I was not yet fifty, I had a kind, loving and beloved wife, lovely children, and a large estate that was growing and expanding with no effort on my part. I was respected by relatives and friends far more than ever before. I was praised by strangers and could consider myself a celebrity without deceiving myself. Moreover I was not unhealthy in mind or body, but on the contrary enjoyed a strength of mind and body such as I had rarely witnessed in my contemporaries. Physically I was able to keep up with the peasants tilling the fields; mentally I was able to work for eight or ten hours at a stretch without suffering any ill effects from the effort. And in these circumstances I found myself at the point where I could no longer go on living and, since I feared death, I had to deceive myself in order to refrain from suicide.

This spiritual condition presented itself to me in the following manner: my life is some kind of stupid and evil joke that someone is playing on me. Despite the fact that I did not acknowledge any such 'someone' who might have created me, this concept of there being someone playing a stupid and evil joke on me by bringing me into the world came to me as the most natural way of expressing my condition.

I could not help feeling that out there somewhere somebody was amusing himself by looking at me and the way I had lived for thirty or forty years, studying, developing, maturing in mind and body. And how now, with a fully matured mind, having reached the precipice from which life reveals itself, I stood there like an utter fool, clearly seeing that there is nothing in life, that there never has been, nor ever will be. 'And he finds it funny...'

But whether or not this someone laughing at me really existed did not make it any easier for me. I could not attribute any rational meaning to a single act, let alone to my whole life. I simply felt astonished that I had failed to realize

this from the beginning. All this had been known to everyone for so long. Today or tomorrow sickness and death will come (and they had already arrived) to those dear to me, and to myself, and nothing will remain other than the stench and the worms. Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they may have been, will be forgotten and will no longer exist. What is all the fuss about then? How can a person carry on living and fail to perceive this - that is what is so astonishing! It is only possible to go on living while you are intoxicated with life; once sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere trick, and a stupid trick! That is exactly what it is: there's nothing even funny or witty about it, it is only cruel and stupid.

There is an old Eastern fable about a traveler who is taken unawares on the steppes by a ferocious wild animal. In order to escape the beast the traveler hides in an empty well, but at the bottom of the well he sees a dragon with its jaws open, ready to devour him. The poor fellow does not dare to climb out because he is afraid of being eaten by the rapacious beast, neither does he dare drop to the bottom of the well for fear of being eaten by the dragon. So he seizes hold of a branch of a bush that is growing in the crevices of the well and clings on to it. His arms grow weak and he knows that he will soon have to resign himself to the death that awaits him on either side. Yet he still clings on, and while he is holding on to the branch he looks around and sees that two mice, one black and one white, are steadily working their way round the bush he is hanging from, gnawing away at it. Sooner or later they will eat through it and the branch will snap, and he will fall into the jaws of the dragon. The traveler sees this and knows that he will inevitably perish. But while he is still hanging there he sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the bush, stretches out his tongue and licks them. In the same way I am clinging to the tree of life, knowing full well that the dragon of death inevitably awaits me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand how I have fallen into this torment. And I try licking the honey that once consoled me, but it no longer gives me pleasure. The white mouse and the black mouse – day and night – are gnawing at the branch from which I am hanging. I can see the dragon clearly and the honey no longer tastes sweet. I can see only one thing; the inescapable dragon and the mice, and I cannot tear my eyes away from them. And this is not a fable but the honest, indisputable truth that all can understand.

The former illusion of the joys of life, which used to suppress the horror of the dragon, no longer deceives me. No matter how many times I am told: you cannot understand the meaning of life, do not think about it but live, I cannot do so because I did it for too long before. Now I cannot help seeing day and night running along and leading me to my death. I see only this because only this is the truth. All the rest is lies.

Those two drops of honey, which more than all else had diverted my eyes from the cruel truth, - my love for the family and for writing, which I called art – I no longer found sweet.

‘The family...,’ I said to myself. But the family, my wife and children, are also human beings. They are in exactly the same situation as I am: they too must either live a lie, or face the terrible truth. What do they live for? Why do I love them and look after them, bring them up and watch over them? In order to reach the same state of despair that fills me, or in order to be dull-witted! If I love them I cannot conceal the truth from them. Each step forward in knowledge leads them to this truth. And the truth is death.

‘Art, poetry...’ For a long time, under the influence of success and praise from others, I had persuaded myself that this was a thing that could be done, despite the fact of approaching death which obliterates everything: myself, my works and the memory of both. But I quickly realized that this too was a delusion. It was clear to me that art is an adornment and embellishment of life. But life has lost its enticement for me; how can I entice others? While I was living a life that was not my own but another life was carrying me along on its waves, while I believed that life had a meaning although I couldn’t express it, all kinds of reflections of life, in poetry and art, gave me joy; I was happy looking at life in art’s little mirror, but when I began to look for the meaning of life, when I felt the necessity of living myself, that little mirror became for me unnecessary, superfluous, and ridiculous, or painful. I could no longer comfort myself with the fact that I saw in the mirror - that my situation was stupid and desperate. It was all right for me to rejoice in the sight while in the depths of my soul I believed that my life had meaning. Then the play of light and shade, the comic, the tragic, the touching, the beautiful, and the frightening aspects of life comforted me. But when I saw

that life is meaningless and terrible, the play in the mirror could no longer amuse me. However sweet the honey, it could not be sweet to me while I saw the dragon and the mice gnawing at my support.

But that was not all. Had I simply understood that life has no meaning I might have accepted it peacefully, knowing that it was my fate. But I could not be calmed by this. If I had been like a man in a wood from which he knows there is no way out, I might have been able to live; but I was like a man in a wood who is lost, and terrified by this rushes around hoping to find his way out, knowing that with each step he is getting more lost, and yet unable to stop rushing about.

It was all terrible. And so, in order to escape from this horror, I wanted to kill myself. I felt a horror of what lay ahead of me and knew that this horror was worse than my present position, but I could neither drive it away nor patiently await the end. However convincing the realization that inevitably a vessel in the heart would burst or something would crack and all would be over, I could not patiently wait for the end. The horror of the darkness was too great and I wanted to escape from it as quickly as possible by means of a rope or a bullet. This was the feeling that, above all, drew me toward suicide.

Chapter 5

Several times I said to myself, 'But perhaps I have overlooked something, or failed to understand something? It cannot be that this state of despair is common to all people.' And I searched for an answer to my questions in all branches of knowledge acquired by people. I struggled for long to find the answer, not out of mere curiosity nor apathetically, but obstinately day and night; I sought it as a perishing man seeks safety, and I found nothing.

I searched all branches of knowledge and not only found nothing, but was convinced that all those who had searched the realms of knowledge like myself had likewise found nothing. Not only had they found nothing, but they had plainly acknowledged the same thing that had led me to despair: the meaninglessness of life as the only indisputable piece of knowledge available to man.

I searched everywhere and thanks to a life spent in study, and to my connections with the world of learning, I had access to scholars of various disciplines. I was not denied insight into their erudition, both through books and in conversation with them, and I learned everything that knowledge has to answer to the question of life.

For a long time I could not believe that knowledge has no answer to the question of life, other than that which it gives. For a long time it seemed to me, as I observed the tone of importance and seriousness with which science asserts its propositions (which have nothing to do with human life), that I had failed to understand something. For a long time I was too timid to oppose the learning of the day, and felt that the fact of my receiving no adequate answers to my question was a result of my own ignorance. But it was no laughing matter to me, it was no joke but a subject that dominated my life. I was finally brought to conclusion that my questions were the only legitimate ones serving as the basis of all branches of knowledge, and that the fault did not lie with me and my questions, but with science if it had the pretension to answer these questions.

My question, the one that brought me to the point of suicide when I was fifty years old, was a most simple one that lies in the soul of every person, from a silly child to a wise old man. It is the question without which life is impossible, as I had learnt from experience. It is this: what will come of what I do today or tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?

In other words, the question can be put like this: why do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything? Or expressed another way: is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitable death awaiting me?

I searched through human knowledge for an answer to the same, variously expressed, question. I found that with respect to this question all human knowledge is divided, into two opposite hemispheres, at the opposite ends of which are two poles: one positive and one negative: yet at neither pole were there any answers to the question of life.

One set of knowledge does not even seem to acknowledge the question and yet gives clear and precise answers to its own independently posed question: this is the realm of experimental knowledge, and at its utmost end stands mathematics. The other realm of knowledge recognizes the question but does not answer it. This is the sphere of theoretic philosophy, at the utmost end of which stands metaphysics.

From my early youth I was enthusiastic about theoretical study, but was later attracted by both mathematical and natural science. Until I had posed my question clearly to myself and the question itself had grown up within me, demanding an urgent resolution, I was satisfied with the hollow answers given by knowledge.

In the experimental field I said to myself, 'Everything develops, differentiates, moving towards complexity and refinement and there are laws governing this progress. You are a part of a whole. When you know as much as possible about the whole, and about the laws of its development, you will understand your place in the whole, and your own self.' Although I am ashamed to admit it, there was a time when I seemed to be satisfied with this.

It was at a time when I myself was developing and growing more complex. My muscles were growing and strengthening, my memory was richer, my capacity to think and comprehend was increasing. I was growing and developing, and, feeling this growth within myself, it was natural for me to believe that there was a law governing the world, in which I could find the answers to the questions of my life. But the time came when I stopped growing; I felt that I was no longer developing but was drying up, my muscles were growing weaker, my teeth falling out, and I saw that this law not only failed to explain anything to me, but that there had never been and never could be such a law, and that I had taken for a law something which I had discovered in myself at a certain time of my life. I examined its definition more strictly, and it became clear to me that there could be no law of perpetual development. It became apparent to me that to say that in the infinity of time and space everything is developing, becoming more perfect, complex and differentiated, is really to say nothing at all. They are all words without a meaning, for in the infinite there is no simple and complex, no before and after, and no better or worse.

The most important thing was that my own personal question, the question of what I am with all my desires, was left completely unanswered. I understood that these studies are very interesting and attractive but that their precision and clarity are inversely proportionate to their applicability to questions concerning life: the less applicable to the questions of life, the clearer and more precise they are, whereas the more they try to provide solutions to the questions of life, the more obscure and unattractive they become. If we turn to those branches of knowledge that attempt to provide solutions to the questions of life, to physiology, psychology, biology and sociology, we encounter a startling poverty of thought, extreme lack of clarity and a completely unjustified pretension to resolve questions beyond their scope, together with continual contradiction between one thinker and another (or even with their own selves). If we turn to the branches of knowledge that are not concerned with resolving life's questions, but which answer their own specialized, scientific questions, we may admire the power of the human intellect, but we know in advance that they will provide no answers to the questions of life. These branches ignore the question. They say: 'As for what you are and why you live, we have no answers and do not involve ourselves

with it. On the other hand, if you need to know about the laws governing light, or about chemical combinations, or about the laws governing the development of organisms; or if you need to know about the laws governing physical bodies and their forms, and the relationship between their size and quantity; or if you need to know the laws of your own mind, then we have clear, precise and irrefutable answers to all this.'

In general, the relationship of the experimental sciences to the questions of life can be expressed in this way. Question: why do I live? Answer: in the infinity of space and the infinity of time infinitely small particles mutate with infinite complexity. When you understand the laws of these mutations you will understand why you live.

In terms of theoretical sciences I would say to myself: 'All mankind lives and develops according to spiritual principles and ideals which guide it. These ideals are expressed in religions, sciences, arts and forms of government. As these ideals become more elevated mankind advances towards greater well-being. I am a part of mankind and my duty therefore is to enhance the recognition and realization of these ideals.' In the days of my mental weakness this reasoning sufficed for me. But as soon as the question of life presented itself to me clearly, the whole of this theory instantly crumbled to dust. As well as the careless vagueness with which this kind of knowledge draws conclusions, and makes generalized deductions about humanity based on a study of only a small proportion of it; as well as the mutual contradictions between the different supporters of this theory as to what man's ideals actually are, the peculiarity, not to say the stupidity, of this view is that in order to answer the question facing us all: what am I? or: why do I live? or: what must I do? man must first resolve the question of what this life of mankind is, of which so little is known and of which he can know only a minute portion in a fraction of a moment of time? In order to understand what he is man must first understand the entire mystery of humanity, a humanity made up of people like himself, who do not understand themselves?

I must confess there was a time when I believed this. It was at a time when I had my own cherished ideals which justified my whims, and I endeavored to concoct a theory by which I could look upon my whims as laws governing

mankind. But once the question of life had risen up in my soul with full clarity, this answer immediately vanished into thin air. I came to realize that just as with the experimental sciences there are genuine sciences and semi-sciences, both trying to give answers beyond their scope, there are similarly a whole series of extremely diverse sciences, also trying to answer questions beyond their scope. These semi-sciences, the judicial, social and historical sciences, all endeavor to resolve man's questions by giving the appearance, each in its own way, of resolving the question of life that concerns all mankind.

But just as in the realms of experimental sciences a person who sincerely asks how he ought to live cannot be satisfied with an answer advising him to study the infinite complexities and mutations of an infinite number of particles in the infinity of space and time; similarly a person who sincerely asks how he ought to live cannot be satisfied with an answer telling him that in order to understand himself he must first study the life of the whole of humanity, of which neither the beginning nor the end is known, nor even the smallest part. And, as with the experimental semi-sciences, the more these other sciences diverge from their purpose, the more they become filled with vagueness, lack of precision, stupidities and contradictions. The problem concerning experimental science is the sequence of cause and effect in material phenomena. If exact science raises the question of a finite cause, it stumbles against an absurdity. The problem of theoretical science is the acknowledgement of the uncaused existence of life. Upon the investigation of causative phenomena – as, for instance, of social and historical phenomena – theoretical science lands also in an absurdity.

Experimental science, therefore, only deals with positive knowledge and reveals the greatness of the human intellect when it does not introduce the question of ultimate causes into its inquiries. Abstract science, on the other hand, only becomes a science and only reveals the greatness of the human intellect when it completely avoids questions concerning the sequence of causative phenomena and examines human only in relation to an ultimate cause. An example of this science, situated at the pole of the hemisphere, is metaphysics, or abstract philosophy. This science clearly poses the question: who am I? And: what is the universe? Why do I exist and why does the

universe exist? And since it has existed this science has always given the same answer. Whether the philosopher calls the essence of life that is within me and within everything an idea, or a substance, a spirit or a will, he is saying the same thing: that I exist and that I am this essence. But how and why he does not know, and if he is a precise thinker he does not answer. I ask, 'Why does this essence exist? What comes of the fact that it is and will be?' And philosophy not only fails to answer but can only ask the same thing itself. And if it is a true philosophy, its whole task lies precisely in posing this question clearly. And if it holds firmly to its purpose then it can have no other answer to the question of what I am and what the universe is than: 'All and nothing.' And to the question of why the universe exists and why I exist, then: 'I do not know.'

Thus, whatever way I examine these speculative answers of philosophy, I can find nothing resembling an answer. This is not because, as in the case of the clear, experimental sciences, the answer does not relate to the question, but because despite all the intellectual effort directed at my question, there is no answer. And instead of an answer all one gets is the same question, only put in a more complicated form.

Chapter 6

In my search for answers to the question of life I felt just like a man who is lost in the woods.

I came out into a clearing, climbed a tree and saw clearly a space without end. But there was no house there, nor could there be. I walked into the thicket, into the gloom and saw the darkness, but there was no house there either.

In the same way I wandered in the forest of human knowledge, both amidst the bright rays of mathematical knowledge and experimental knowledge, where wide horizons were opened up to me, but in a direction where I could find no house, and amidst the darkness of speculative knowledge where I was immersed in ever deeper gloom the further I progressed. And I became quite convinced that there was not, and could not be, a way out.

When I inclined to the bright side of knowledge I realized that I was only avoiding facing the question. However bright and attractive those horizons spreading out before me were, and however tempting it was to immerse myself in the infinity of all this knowledge, I already knew that the clearer the knowledge was, the less I needed it, and the less it answered my question. 'Well,' I said to myself, 'I know everything that science so urgently wants to know and along that path there is no answer to the question of the meaning of my life. In the speculative realm I knew that despite the fact, or rather precisely because of the fact, that the primary purpose of this knowledge is to answer my question, the answer given was none other than the one I had already given myself: what is the meaning of my life? It has none. Or: what will come of my life? Nothing. Or: why does everything there is exist, and why do I exist? Because it does.'

When I put my questions to one branch of human knowledge I received a countless number of precise answers to things I had not asked: the chemical composition of the stars, the movement of the sun towards the constellation Hercules, the origin of the species and of man, the forms of infinitely tiny

atoms, the fluctuations of infinitely small and imponderable particles of ether. But the only answer this branch of knowledge provided to my question concerning the meaning of life was this: you are that which you call your life; you are a temporary, incidental accumulation of particles. The mutual interaction and alteration of these particles produces in you something you refer to as your life. This accumulation can only survive for a limited length of time; when the interaction of these particles ceases, that which you call life will cease, bringing an end to all your questions. You are a randomly united lump of something. This lump decomposes and the fermentation is called your life. The lump will disintegrate and the fermentation will end, together with all your questions. This is the answer given by the exact side of knowledge, and if it adheres strictly to its principles, it cannot answer otherwise.

However, the truth is that this answer does not reply to the question. I need to know the meaning of my life, and the fact that it is a particle of infinity not only fails to give it any meaning, but eliminates any possible meaning.

The experimental side of knowledge vaguely compromises with the speculative side in saying that the meaning of life lies in development and in the encouragement of this development. But owing to the inaccuracies and obscurities these cannot be regarded as answers.

Whenever the other side of knowledge, theoretical side of human knowledge, sticks firmly to its principles and gives direct answers to the question, it has always, throughout the ages, given the same answer: the universe is something infinite and incomprehensible. Human's life is an inscrutable part of this inscrutable 'whole'. Again I exclude all the compromises made between the speculative and experimental sciences, which support a whole array of semi-sciences: the so-called judicial, political and historical sciences. In these sciences there is the same mistaken approach to the understanding of development and perfection, with the only difference that in one instance we have the development of everything, and in the other the development of people's lives. The mistake is identical: development and perfection in infinity can have no purpose or direction, and as far as my question is concerned, no answer.

When speculative knowledge is exact, namely in true philosophy, and not that which Schopenhauer calls professorial philosophy (which serves only to divide all existing phenomena into new philosophical categories, with new names), here when philosophy does not lose sight of the essential question, the answer is always the same as the one given by Socrates, Schopenhauer, Solomon and Buddha.

‘We grow closer to the truth only to the extent that we grow further away from life,’ says Socrates when preparing himself for death. ‘What do we, who love the truth, strive for in life? In order to be free of the body and of all the evil that arises from the life of the body. If this is so then how can we fail to rejoice when death approaches?’ ‘The wise man seeks death throughout his life, and therefore death is not frightening to him.’

This is what Schopenhauer says: ‘If we understand the inner essence of the universe as will, and if we understand all phenomena, from the dark forces of nature to the full conscious activity of man, as no more than the objectivity of the will, we cannot escape the conclusion that it is in the free denial and self-renunciation of the will that all phenomena disappear; the constant striving and the aimless and untiring allurements towards all the levels of subjectivity in which and through which the universe exists, will disappear, as will all the various subsequent forms. When form disappears so too will all phenomena of form, including both space and time, until eventually even the last basis of form will disappear, i.e. subject and object. There is no idea without will, and no universe. Before us, of course, there remains only nothingness. But that which opposes this transition into nothingness, our nature, is but our own will to exist (Will zum Leben), of which both we and our universe are made up. That we are afraid of nothingness, or that we wish to live, only indicates that we ourselves are nothing other than this desire to live and we know nothing other than this. Therefore what remains to us, who are so full of will after the annihilation of the will, is of course nothingness; on the other hand, in those in whom the will has been reversed and renounced, the whole of this material universe of ours with all its suns and galaxies is nothing.’

‘Vanity of vanities,’ says Solomon, ‘all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun? One generation passes away, and

another generation cometh, but the earth abides forever... The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See this is new? It hath been already of old time, which was before us. There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after. I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under the heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit... I communed with mine own heart, saying, Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increases knowledge increases sorrow. I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, it is mad: and of mirth, what doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I built me houses; I planted me vineyards; I made me gardens and orchards, and planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water to water therewith the wood that brings forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labor: and this was my portion of all my labor. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had labored to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of the spirit, and there was no profit, from them

under the sun. And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly. But I myself perceived also that one event happens to them all. Then I said in my heart, as it happens to the fool, so it happens even to me; and why was I then wiser? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dies the wise man? As the fool. Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit. Yes, I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me... For what hath man of all his labor, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath labored under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail is grief, yea his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labor...

All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrifices and to him that sacrifices not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that swears, as he that fears an oath. There is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all; yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. For him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever of any thing that is done under the sun.'

Thus speaks Solomon, or the person who wrote these words.

This is what an Indian sage says: 'Saki-Muni, a young and happy Prince, from whom illness, old age and death had been kept secret, went out for a drive one day and saw a frightful, toothless, drivelling old man. The Prince, who until now knew nothing of old age, was aghast and asked the driver what it was and what had brought the man to such a pitiful, repulsive and ugly state. When he learnt that it is a fate common to all men and that he, a young

Prince, inevitably faced the same thing, he could go no further and gave orders to return home so that he could think it over. He shut himself up alone and reflected on it. Presumably his thoughts consoled him because he went out again, happy and cheerful, for another drive. But this time he met a sick man. He saw an emaciated bluish, trembling man, with dim eyes. The Prince, from whom sickness had been hidden, stopped the driver and asked what this was. When he discovered that it was sickness, to which all people are susceptible and that he, a healthy and happy Prince, might become sick tomorrow, he again lost the spirit to be cheerful and demanded to be taken home, where he again sought solace. He probably found it for he set out again, for the third time. But on this occasion he saw yet another new thing: he saw some people carrying something. 'What is it?' 'A dead man.' 'What does dead mean?' asked the Prince. He was told that to be dead was to be what this man was. The Prince went up to the dead body, uncovered it and looked at it. 'What will become of him now?' he asked. The Prince was told that the man would be buried in the ground. 'Why?' 'Because he will never live again and all that will come of him is stench and worms.' 'And is this the fate of all men? Will it happen to me too? Will I be buried and give off a stench and be consumed by worms?' 'Yes.' 'Go back! I do not wish to go for a drive. I will never go for a drive again!'

Saki-Muni could find no consolation in life and resolved that life is a great evil, and he devoted all the strength of his soul to freeing himself, and others, from life. He wanted to free them in such a way that after death life would not be renewed anywhere, but would be completely annihilated, at the roots. This is what all Indian sages say.

These then are the straightforward answers given by human wisdom in reply to the questions of life:

'The life of the body is evil and a lie. And since the annihilation of the life of the body is a blessing we must long for it,' says Socrates.

'Life is that which it should not be: evil. The transition into nothingness is the only thing sacred in life,' says Schopenhauer.

‘Everything in the world, both folly and wisdom, richness and poverty, happiness and grief, all is vanity and emptiness. A man dies and nothing remains. This is absurd,’ says Solomon.

‘It is impossible to live in the consciousness that suffering, weakening, old age and death are inevitable; we must free ourselves from life, from all possibility of life,’ says Buddha.

And the very same thing said by these powerful minds has been said and thought by millions of people similar to them. And I too have thought and felt it.

And thus my perusals in the realms of knowledge not only failed to lead me out of my despair, but simply increased it. One branch of knowledge did not answer the question of life; the other gave an answer but the reply only confirmed my despair and showed me that the conclusion I had reached was not the result of my erring ways, or of a morbid state of mind. On the contrary it convinced me that what I had thought was correct, and in accord with the conclusions reached by the most penetrating human minds.

To deceive oneself is pointless. All is vanity. Happy is he who was never born. Death is better than life; one must free oneself from it.

Chapter 7

Failing to find an explanation in knowledge I began to search for it in life, hoping to find it among the people around me. I began to observe how these people like myself lived, and how they dealt with the question that had led me to despair.

And this is what I discovered among people of the same education and lifestyle as myself.

I found that these people of my circle had four methods of escape from the dreadful situation in which we all are.

The first method of escape is that of ignorance. It consists of failing to recognize, or understand, that life is evil and absurd. The majority of the people of this kind are either women, or very young, or very stupid and have not yet understood the problem of life that presented itself to Schopenhauer, Solomon and Buddha. They see neither the dragon that is waiting for them, nor the mice that are gnawing away at the bush from which they are clinging, and they lick the drops of honey. But they only lick them for a while: something will turn their attention to the dragon and the mice and their licking will come to an end. There was nothing I could learn from them, for it is impossible to stop knowing what you know.

The second method of escape is that of Epicureanism. It consists, while knowing the hopelessness of life, of enjoying the blessings we have without looking at the dragon or the mice, and of licking the honey in the best possible way, especially if a lot of it has fallen on the bush. Solomon describes this method thus:

Then I commended mirth, because a man has no better thing under the sun than to eat, to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labor the days of his life, which God gives him under the sun...

Go your way, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry

heart... Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he has given you under the sun, all the days of your vanity: for that is your portion in this life, and in your labor which you take under the sun... Whatsoever your hand finds to do, do it with thy might; for there is not work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, wherever you go (Ecclesiastes, VIII.15, IX.7, 9–10).

Most people of our circle take this way out. The conditions in which they find themselves dictate that they have a greater share of the good things in life than the bad; their moral torpor allows them to forget that all the privileges of their position are accidental and that not everyone can have a thousand wives and palaces as Solomon did; that for every man with a thousand wives there are a thousand men without wives, and that for every palace there are a thousand men who built it by the sweat of their brow, and that the same chance that has made you Solomon today might make you Solomon's slave tomorrow. The dullness of these people's imagination enables them to forget over what the Buddha has lost the peace: the inevitability of illness, old age and death, which can, if not today then tomorrow, destroy all these pleasures.

The fact that a number of these people affirm that the dullness of their thought and imagination is something called 'positive philosophy' fails, in my opinion, to make them any different from the ranks of those who, failing to see the question, lick the honey. I could not imitate these people, for not sharing their dullness of imagination I could not create it artificially in myself. Like any alive person, I could not turn my eyes away from the mice and the dragon once I had seen them.

The third method of escape is through strength and energy. It consists of realizing that life is evil and senseless, and of destroying it. This is what a few strong and consistent people do. Having understood the utter stupidity of the joke that is being played on them, and realizing that the blessings of the dead are far greater than the blessings of the living, and that the best thing of all is not to live, they act accordingly and instantly bring an end to this stupid joke, using any available means: a noose around the neck, water, a stab in the heart, a train on a railway line. There are increasing numbers of people belonging to our circle who act in this way. On the whole those who behave

like this do so during the prime of their life, when the strength of the soul is in full force and few of the habits that undermine human reason have yet been acquired. I saw that this was the most worthy way out and wanted to take that action.

The fourth road of escape is that of weakness. It consists of clinging to a life that is evil and futile, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it. People belonging to this category know that death is preferable to life but, lacking the strength to act rationally and bring a quick end to the deception by killing themselves, they seem to wait for something. This is the escape of weakness, for if I know of something better and it is within my reach, then why not yield to it? I myself belonged to this category.

Thus do those of my own class, in four different ways, save themselves from the terrible contradiction. However hard I strained my mental faculties, I could not yet see another way out except these four. The first way: not to understand that life is meaningless, vain, and evil and that it's better not to live. I could not help knowing this, and once I had realized it I could not close my eyes to it. The second way is to make use of life, such as it is, without thinking about the future. Neither could I do this. Like Saki-Muni, I could not ride out hunting when I knew that suffering, old age and death exist. My imagination was too vivid for that. Moreover I could not take pleasure in those fleeting occasions which momentarily threw pleasure on my existence. The third method is to have realized that life is evil and absurd and to bring it to an end by killing oneself. The fourth method of escape is to live like Solomon and Schopenhauer, knowing that life is a stupid joke being played on us, but nevertheless continuing to live, to wash, to dress, to eat, to talk, and even to write books. Although I found it offensive and painful I remained in this position.

I can now see that if I did not kill myself it was because of some vague awareness that my ideas were mistaken. No matter how convincing and irrefutable I felt my train of thoughts to be, as well as that of the wise ideas that had led us all to the conclusion that life is meaningless I still had some obscure doubts as to the validity of the final outcome of my deliberations.

It was expressed as follows: I, that is my reason, have acknowledged that life is irrational. If there is nothing higher than reason (and there is not, and nothing can prove that there is), then reason is the creator of life for me. Without reason I can have no life. How then can reason deny life when it is the creator of it? Or looking at it another way: if there were no life my reason would not exist, which must mean that reason is the offspring of life. Life is everything. Reason is the fruit of life and yet this reason rejects life itself. I felt that something was not quite right here.

Life is a senseless evil, that is certain, I said to myself. Yet I have lived and still live, and so too humanity has lived and still lives. How can this be? Why do men live when it is possible not to live? Can it be that only Schopenhauer and I have been intelligent enough to understand the senselessness and evil of life?

The argument about the vanity of life is not particularly subtle and all simple folk have known it for a long time; yet they have lived and still live. How is it they all live and never think of doubting the logic of life?

My knowledge, confirmed by the wisdom of the sages, had revealed to me that everything in the world, organic and inorganic, is arranged with the most unusual intelligence, and it is only my position that is absurd. But these fools, the vast masses of simple folk, while knowing nothing about the organic and inorganic arrangement of the world, continue to live and feel that life is very sensibly organized!

And it occurred to me that there might be something I did not yet know. After all, that is exactly how ignorance behaves. Ignorance always says what I am saying. When it does not know something it says that the thing it does not know is stupid. In any event it appears that there is a whole section of mankind that has lived and still lives, as if it knew the meaning of life, for without knowing this meaning it could not live. Yet I am saying that all life is meaningless and that I cannot live.

No one prevents Schopenhauer and me from denying life. Go ahead then, kill yourself and you won't have to think about it again. If you don't like life kill

yourself. If you live and cannot understand the meaning of it, put an end to it, but don't turn around and start talking and writing about the fact that you don't understand life. You find yourself in cheerful company, where everyone is happy and know what they are doing, so if you find it boring and objectionable, leave!

For in the end what are we, who are convinced that suicide is obligatory and yet cannot resolve to commit it, other than the weakest, the most inconsistent and, speaking frankly, the most stupid of people, making such a song and dance with our banalities.

After all, our wisdom, however irrefutable it may be, has provided us with no understanding of the meaning of life. Yet all those millions who make up humanity manage to live without ever doubting its meaning.

Indeed, since those long ago days when life began and of which I know nothing, people who knew the argument about the vanity of life (which seems to me to prove its senselessness), have nevertheless lived and brought to life a meaning of their own. Ever since there has been some form of human life, people have had this understanding of life, and have pursued this life, and passed it down to me. Everything that is in me and around me is the fruit of their understanding of life. These very instruments of thought with which I judge life, and condemn it, were made by them and not by me. I myself was born, educated and grew up thanks to them. They dug up the iron, taught us how to fell wood, tamed the cattle and the horses, taught us how to sow the crops and how to live together; they created an order in life. They taught me how to think and speak. I am their offspring, provided by them with food and water, taught by them, able to think and speak using their thoughts and words, and now I have proved to them that it is all senseless! 'There is something wrong here,' I told myself, 'I have made a mistake somewhere. 'But I could not discover where the mistake lay.

Chapter 8

None of these doubts, which I can now express more or less coherently, could I have formulated at the time. At the time I simply felt that despite the fact that my deductions about the vanity of life were logically unavoidable and were confirmed by the greatest thinkers, there was still something wrong with them. Whether it was in my reasoning, or whether it was in my formulation of the question, I did not know. I simply felt that the reasoning behind my conviction was complete, but that it was not enough. All these conclusions failed to persuade me to follow my argument to its end, that is to kill myself. I would not be speaking the truth if I said that it was through my reason that I arrived where I did and yet did not kill myself. My reason was working, but so too was something else that I can only call a consciousness of life. There was also another force at work which made me pay attention to the latter and not to the former. It was this force that led me out of my state of despair and guided my reason in an entirely different direction. It compelled me to pay attention to the fact that I, and the hundreds of others similar to myself, do not comprise the whole of humanity, and that I still did not know what this life of humanity was.

As I looked around at the narrow circle of my colleagues I saw nothing but people who had failed to understand the question, or who had understood it but drowned it in the intoxication of life, or who had understood it and had put an end to their lives, or who understood it but through weakness continued living in despair. And I saw no others. I thought that this narrow circle of scholars, and of rich and distinguished people, to which I belonged made up the whole of mankind and that those millions who had lived and still live were just those: some sort of cattle, not people.

It seems so strange to me now, so utterly incomprehensible, that in my reasoning of life I could have overlooked the life of humanity that surrounded me on all sides and that I could have been so ridiculously mistaken as to think that my life, and the life of Solomon and Schopenhauer, was the true, normal life, while the lives of millions was not worthy of attention. However strange it may seem now, I know it was so at the time. Amidst the wanderings of my

conceited mind I felt certain that Solomon, Schopenhauer and myself had posed the question so honestly and exactly that there could be no two ways about it. I felt so certain that all these millions simply belonged to the category of those who had not yet penetrated the depths of the question, that as I searched for the meaning of my life it never once occurred to me to think: 'What sort of meaning do all the millions who have lived, and do live in the world give to their lives?'

I lived in this state of madness for a long time. It is a state which if not in deed then in words is very characteristic of more liberated and learned people. But whether it was thanks to my somewhat strange and instinctive love of the true working people that I was forced to understand them and to realize that they are not as stupid as we thought; or whether it was thanks to the sincerity of my conviction that I knew of nothing better to do than hang myself, I sensed anyway that if I wanted to live and to understand the meaning of life I must not seek it among those who have lost it and wish to kill themselves, but among the millions of people living and dead who have created life, and who carry the weight of our lives together with their own. And I looked around at the enormous masses of simple, uneducated people without wealth, who have lived and who still live, and I saw something quite different. I saw that with a few exceptions all those millions do not fit into my divisions, and that I could not categorize them as people who did not understand the question because they themselves posed, and answered, the question with unusual clarity. Neither could I categorize them as epicureans, since their lives rest more on deprivation and suffering than on pleasure. I could still less regard them as living out their meaningless lives irrationally, since they could explain every act of their lives, including death. They considered suicide the greatest evil. It appeared that mankind as a whole had some kind of comprehension of the meaning of life that I did not acknowledge and derided. It followed that rational knowledge does not provide the meaning of life, but excludes it; while the meaning given to life by the millions of people, by humanity as a whole, is founded on some sort of knowledge that is despised and considered false.

The knowledge based on reason, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life, yet the vast masses – humanity as a whole –

recognize that this meaning lies in irrational knowledge. And this irrational knowledge is faith, the very thing that I could not help rejecting. This God, one in three, the creation in six days, the devils and angels and all the rest that I could not accept without going insane.

My position was terrible. I knew that I would find nothing on the path of rational knowledge except the denial of life, but there, in faith, nothing except the denial of reason, which was even more impossible than the denial of life. According to rational knowledge life is an evil and people know it. They have the choice of ending their lives and yet they have always carried on living, just as I myself have done, despite having known for a long time that life is meaningless and evil. According to faith it follows that in order to comprehend the meaning of life I must renounce my reason, the very thing for which meaning was necessary.

Chapter 9

A contradiction arose from which there were only two ways out: either that which I called reasonable was not as reasonable as I thought, or that which I felt to be irrational was not as irrational as I thought. And I started to check the line of argument that stemmed from my rational knowledge.

As I checked this line of argument I found it to be entirely correct. The conclusion that life is nothing was inevitable, but I spotted a mistake. The mistake was that my thinking did not correspond to the question I had posed. The question was: why do I live? I.e. what of real and imperishable will come of my illusory and perishable life - what meaning has my finite existence in an infinite universe? In order to answer this question I studied life.

Clearly the solution to all the possible questions of life could not satisfy me because my question, however simple it may seem at first, involves a demand for an explanation of the finite by the infinite and vice versa.

I had asked: what meaning has life beyond time, beyond space and beyond cause? And I was answering the question: 'What is the meaning of my life within time, space and cause?' The result was that after long and labored thought I could only answer: none.

In my deliberations I was continually drawing comparisons between the finite and the finite, and the infinite and the infinite, and I could not have done otherwise. Thus I reached the only conclusion I could reach: force is force, matter is matter, will is will, the infinite is the infinite, nothing is nothing; and I could go no further than that.

It was somewhat similar to what happens in mathematics when, trying to resolve an equation, we get an identity. The method of deduction is correct, but the only answer obtained is that a equals a , and x equals x , or o equals o . Precisely the same thing was happening with my reasoning concerning the meaning of life. The only answers the sciences give to this question are identities.

And really, strictly rational knowledge, such as that of Descartes, begins with complete doubt in everything and throws aside any knowledge founded on faith, reconstructing everything along laws of reason and experiment. And it can provide no answer other than the one I reached: an indefinite one. It was only at first that I thought knowledge had given an affirmative answer, Schopenhauer's answer that life has no meaning and is evil. But when I went into the matter I realized that this answer is not affirmative and that it was only my senses that had taken it to be so. Strictly expressed, as it is by the Brahmins, Solomon, and Schopenhauer, the answer is but a vague one, an identity: o equals o, life presented to me as nothing is nothing. Thus, philosophical knowledge denies nothing but simply replies that it cannot solve the question, and that as far as it is concerned any resolution remains indefinite.

Having understood this, I realized that it was impossible to search for an answer to my questions in rational knowledge; that the answer given by rational knowledge simply suggests that the answer can only be obtained by stating the question in another way, by introducing the question of the relation of the finite to the infinite. I realized that no matter how irrational and distorted the answers given by faith might be, they had the advantage of introducing to every answer a relationship between the finite and the infinite, without which there can be no solution. Whichever way I put the question: how am I to live? the answer is always: according to God's law. Or to the question: is there anything real that will come of my life? the answer is: eternal torment or eternal bliss. Or, to the question: what meaning is there that is not destroyed by death? the answer is: unity with the infinite, God, heaven.

Thus in addition to rational knowledge, which I had hitherto thought to be the only knowledge, I was inevitably led to acknowledge that there does exist another kind of knowledge – an irrational one – possessed by humanity as a whole: faith, which affords the possibility of living. Faith remained as irrational to me as before, but I could not fail to recognize that it alone provides mankind with the answers to the question of life, and consequently with the possibility of living.

Rational knowledge had led me to recognize that life is meaningless. My life came to a halt and I wanted to kill myself. As I looked around at people, at humanity as a whole, I saw that they lived and affirmed that they knew the meaning of life. I looked at myself. I had lived as long as I knew the meaning of life. For me, as for others, faith provided the meaning of life and the possibility of living.

Having looked around further at people in other countries and at my contemporaries and predecessors, I saw the same thing. Where there is life there is faith. Since the day of creation faith has made it possible for mankind to live, and the essential aspects of that faith are always and everywhere the same.

Whatever answers faith gives, regardless of which faith, or to whom the answers are given, such answers always give an infinite meaning to the finite existence of man; a meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation or death. This means that only in faith can we find the meaning and possibility of life. I realized that the essential meaning of faith lies not only in the 'the unveiling of unseen things', and so on, or in revelation (this is only a description of one of the signs of faith); not is it simply the relationship between man and God (it is necessary first to define faith, then God, and not God through faith); nor is it an agreement with what one has been told, although this is what faith is commonly understood to be. Faith is a knowledge of the meaning of human life, the consequence of which is that man does not kill himself but lives. Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something. If he didn't believe that one must live for something, then he wouldn't live. If he doesn't see and doesn't understand the illusoriness of the finite, he believes in the finite; if he does understand the illusoriness of the finite, he must believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live.

I recalled the whole course of my inner thinking and was horrified. It was now clear to me that in order for man to live he must either be unaware of the infinite, or he must have some explanation of the meaning of life by which the finite can be equated with the infinite. I had this explanation but it was no use to me while I believed in the finite; and I began to test it against my

reason. And in the light of reason my former explanation vanished into thin air. But the time came when I no longer believed in the finite. And then I began, on a rational basis, to construct out of what I knew an explanation which might give a meaning to life; but nothing came of it. Together with the finest human intellects I reached the conclusion that 0 equals 0 and was most astonished at reaching this conclusion and that there could be no other.

What did I do when I searched for an answer in the experimental sciences? I wanted to find out why I lived and I therefore studied everything that exists outside myself. It became clear that I could discover a great deal, but nothing of what I needed.

What happened when I searched for the answer in the realms of philosophy? I studied the thoughts of those who found themselves in the same predicament as myself and who had no answer to the question of why we live. It was apparent that I could discover nothing here that I did not already know: namely that it is impossible to know anything.

What am I? A part of the infinite. In those few words lay the whole problem. Can it be that this question has only occurred to man so recently? Can it be that no one before me has posed this question to himself, such a simple question, one that might spring to the lips of any intelligent child?

Surely this question has been raised ever since man has existed. Since the beginning it has been evident that solving the question by equating the finite with the finite is just as unsatisfactory as equating the infinite with the infinite. Since time immemorial man has striven to express the relationship between the finite and the infinite.

All the concepts we use to compare the finite to the infinite, and to arrive at an understanding of life, of the concepts of God, freedom and goodness, are put to the test of logic. But they fail to stand up to the critique of reason.

If it were not so frightening it would be amusing to observe the pride and complacency with which we, like children, take apart the watch, pull out the spring and make a toy of it, and are then surprised when the watch stops working.

It is both valuable and necessary to have a solution to the contradiction between the finite and the infinite, an answer to the question of life that makes it possible to live. The one solution we always find everywhere, among all peoples, is the solution that has been passed down to us from times we have lost all record of. It is such a difficult solution that we would be unable to devise anything like it. And it is a solution which we casually destroy so that we may yet again pose the question that confronts us all, and for which we do not have an answer.

The concepts of an infinite God, the sanctity of the soul, the relationship between God and the affairs of man, of moral good and evil, are all concepts that have been worked out in history, through the life of a humanity that is hidden to us. Without the existence of these concepts there would be neither life nor myself, and yet I, rejecting all the efforts of humanity, wanted to do it all over again, alone, in my own way.

I did not think so at the time but the germs of these thoughts were already within me. I realized that: (1) Despite our wisdom my position alongside Schopenhauer and Solomon was silly: we considered life to be evil and nevertheless continued to live. This was apparent stupidity because, if life is meaningless and I am so fond of reason, then I must destroy life so that no one can deny it. (2) All our arguments went round in a vicious circle, like a wheel that is not attached to the carriage. However much, and however well, we reasoned, we could find no answer to the question because 0 will always equal 0 , and therefore, our method must be mistaken. (3) I began to realize that the most profound wisdom of man is preserved in the answers given by faith, and that I did not have the right to negate them on grounds of reason and, above all, that it is these answers alone that can reply to the question of life.

Chapter 10

I could see this but it did not make matters any easier for me.

I was now prepared to accept any faith as long as it did not demand a direct denial of reason, which would have been a trickery. So I studied books on Buddhism and Mohammedanism and most of all I studied Christianity, both through its writings and through people living around me.

Naturally I first turned to believers from my own circle, to learned people, Orthodox theologians, elder monks, theologians of the newest types of Orthodoxy, and even to the so-called New Christians who taught salvation through faith in redemption. I grasped these believers and questioned them on how they believed and what they understood to be the meaning of life.

Despite making all possible concessions and avoiding all arguments I could not accept the faith of these people. I saw that what they took to be faith gave no explanation to the meaning of life but obscured it, and that they themselves did not profess their faith in response to the question of life, that had led me to faith, but for some other reasons which were alien to me.

I recall the tormenting feeling of fear should I return to my former despair, after the hope I had experienced so many times in my relations with these people. The more precisely they expounded their teachings to me, the more clearly I saw their errors, until I lost all hope of finding an explanation to the meaning of life in their faith.

I was not so much alienated by the fact that in expounding their religious beliefs they mixed with Christian truths that had always been close to me much that was unnecessary and irrational. It was more the fact that the lives of these people were just like my own, with the only difference that it wasn't in accordance with the very principles they expounded in their teaching. I felt strongly that they were deceiving themselves and that, like myself, they had no other concept of life than of living while they lived and of grabbing hold of everything they could. I saw this because if they had had that meaning of

life in which the fear of privation, suffering, and death is annihilated, then they wouldn't be frightened of them. But these believers of our class lived, just as I did, in excess, striving to maintain and increase it and fearing deprivation, suffering and death. Like myself and all non-believers, they lived only to satisfy their desires and they lived just as badly as, if not worse than, non-believers.

No arguments could convince me of the truth of their faith. Only actions showing me that they had an understanding of life that did not make them afraid, as I was, of poverty, sickness and death might have convinced me. But I witnessed no such behaviour among the believers of my circle. So that, while I witnessed this sort of behaviour among those of my circle who did not believe, I never witnessed it among the so-called believers.

I realized that the belief these men had was not the faith I was seeking and that their faith is not really faith but only one of the epicurean consolations in life. I understood that while this faith might perhaps serve, if not for consolation, then as some kind of distraction for a repentant Solomon on his deathbed, it is entirely unsuitable for the vast majority of mankind who do not seek amusement at the expense of other men's labor, but to make something of life.

In order for mankind to live and to perpetuate life, instilling it with meaning, these millions must all have some different, more genuine concept of faith. Indeed it was not that neither I nor Solomon, nor Schopenhauer, had killed ourselves that convinced me of the existence of faith, but the fact that these millions have lived and still live, bearing those like Solomon and myself on the crest of their lives.

And I began to grow close to the believers among the poor, simple, uneducated folk: pilgrims, monks, sectarians and peasants. The belief held by these people was the same Christianity as that of the pseudo-believers of my circle. They too had mixed a great deal of superstition alongside Christian truths, but the difference was that while superstition was quite unnecessary to the believers of my circle, had nothing to do with their lives and simply provided some kind of epicurean distraction, the superstitions of the believer

belonging to the laboring section of the population were so interconnected with their lives that they could not have conceived of life without them; they were a necessary condition of their lives. The whole way of life of the believers of my own circle stood in contradiction to their faith, whereas the whole way of life of the believers from the working population reaffirmed the meaning their faith gave to life. And I started to look more closely at the life and faith of these people, and the further I looked the more convinced I became that theirs was the true faith, that their faith was essential to them, and that it alone provides a sense of the meaning and possibility of life. In contrast to what I saw among the people of my class where it is possible to live without faith and where among the thousands there is barely one who can admit to being a believer, among them there is hardly one in a thousand who does not believe. In contrast to what I saw happening in my own circle, where the whole of life is spent in idleness, amusement and dissatisfaction with life, I saw that these people who labored hard throughout their entire lives were less dissatisfied with life than the rich. In contrast to the people of our class who resist and curse the deprivations and sufferings of their lot, these people accept sickness and grief without question or protest, and with a calm and firm conviction that this is how it must be, that it cannot be otherwise and that it is all for the good. Contrary to us, who the more intelligent we are the less we understand the meaning of life and see some kind of malicious joke in the fact that we suffer and die, these people live, suffer and approach death peacefully and, more often than not, joyfully. In contrast to the fact that a peaceful death, a death without horror and despair, is a most rare exception in our circle, a tormented, rebellious and unhappy death is a most rare exception among these people. And there are millions and millions of these people who are deprived of everything which for the Solomons and I is the sole good of life, and who nevertheless find tremendous happiness in life. I looked more widely around me. I looked at the lives of the multitudes who have lived in the past and who live today. And of those who understood the meaning of life I saw not two, or three, or ten, but hundreds, thousands and millions. And all of them, endlessly varied in their customs, minds, educations and positions, and in complete contrast to my ignorance, knew the meaning of life and death, endured suffering and hardship, lived and died and saw this not as vanity but good.

And I came to love these people. The further I penetrated into the lives of those living and dead about whom I had read and heard, the more I loved them and the easier it became for me to live. I lived like this for about two years and a great change took place within me, for which I had been preparing for a long time and the roots of which had always been in me. What happened was that the life of our class, the rich and learned, became not only distasteful to me, but lost all meaning. All our activities, our discussions, our science and our art struck me as sheer indulgence. I realized that there was no meaning to be found here. It was the activities of the laboring people, those who produce life, that presented itself to me as the only true way. I realized that the meaning given to this life was a true one, and I accepted it.

Chapter 11

I remembered how these very beliefs repelled me and seemed devoid of any meaning when they were professed by people who lived in contradiction to them, and I remembered how these same beliefs attracted me and seemed sensible when I saw people living in accord with them; and I realized why I had rejected them and found them meaningless and why I now accepted them and found them full of meaning. I realized that I had been lost, and how I had become lost. I had strayed not so much because my ideas had been incorrect as because I had lived foolishly. I realized that I had been blinded from the truth not so much through my mistaken thoughts as through my life itself, which had been spent in satisfying desire and in exclusive conditions of epicureanism. I realized that my question as to what my life is, and the answer that it is an evil, was quite correct. The only mistake was that the answer which only applied to me I applied to life as a whole. I had asked myself what my life was and had received the answer that it is evil and meaningless. And this was quite true, for my life of indulgent pursuits was meaningless and evil, but that answer applied only to my life and not to human life in general. I understood that truth I later found in the gospels: that people often preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil. For he who acts maliciously hates light and avoids it so as not to throw light on his deeds. I understood that in order to understand the meaning of life it is first of all necessary that life is not evil and meaningless, and then one may use reason to understand it. I realized why I had for so long been treading so close to such an obvious truth without seeing it, and that in order to think and speak about human life one must think and speak about human life and not about the lives of a few parasites. The truth has always been the truth, just as $2 \times 2 = 4$, but I had not admitted it, because in acknowledging that $2 \times 2 = 4$ I would have had to admit that I am not a good man. And it was more important and necessary for me to feel that I was good than to admit that $2 \times 2 = 4$. I came to love good people and to loathe myself, and I acknowledged the truth. And then it all became clear to me.

Imagine an executioner who has spent all his life torturing people and

chopping off heads, or a hopeless drunkard, or a madman who has spent his entire life in a dark room which he detests but imagines that he would die if he left it – imagine if they should ask themselves, ‘What is life?’ Obviously the only answer they could come up with is that life is the greatest of evils. The madman’s answer would be absolutely correct, but only with respect to himself. Am I such a madman? Are all of us who are wealthy and learned such madmen? And I realized that we really are such madmen. I, at any rate, was one.

Indeed, a bird is made in such a way that it can fly, gather food and build a nest, and when I see a bird doing these things I rejoice. Goats, rabbits and wolves are made in order to eat, multiply and feed their families, and when they do this I feel quite sure that they are happy and that their lives are meaningful. What should a man do? He too must work for his existence, just as the animals do, but with the difference that he will perish if he does it alone, for he must work for an existence, not just for himself, but for everyone. And when he does this I feel quite sure that he is happy and that his life has meaning. And what had I been doing for all those thirty years of conscious life? Far from working for an existence for everyone, I had not even done so for myself. I had lived as a parasite and when I asked myself why I lived, I received the answer: for nothing. If the meaning of human existence lies in working to procure it I had spent thirty years not procuring life, but ruining it for myself and for others. How then could I expect any answer other than that my life is evil and meaningless? Indeed it was evil and meaningless.

The life of the world runs according to someone’s will; our lives and the lives of everything in existence are in someone else’s hands. In order to have any chance of comprehending this will we must first fulfill it by doing what is asked of us. If I do not do what is asked of me I will never understand what it is that is asked of me, and still less what is asked of us all, of the whole world.

If a naked, hungry beggar were taken at a crossroads and led to an enclosed part of a splendid establishment where he is given food and drink, and then forced to move some kind of handle up and down, it is obvious that before

deciding why it was he had been brought there to move the handle, and whether or not the establishment was reasonably arranged, the beggar must first move the handle. If he moves the handle he will see that it operates a pump, that the pump draws water and the water flows into the garden. Then he will be taken away from the enclosed place and given another job, and he will gather fruits and will enter into the joy of his lord. As he progresses from lower to higher tasks he will continue to understand more and more about the structure of the establishment and participate in it, and he will never think of asking why he is there, and he will never blame his master.

Likewise the simple uneducated working people, whom we refer to as the herd, fulfill the will of their master without ever blaming him. But we, the wise, eat the master's food without doing what he asks of us; instead of doing it we sit around in circles debating whether we should do something as stupid as moving a handle up and down. And then we think it over and decide that either the master is stupid, or that he does not exist and that we are the only intelligent ones. The only thing is, we feel that we are no good for anything and that we must somehow escape from ourselves.

Chapter 12

My realization of the errors in rational knowledge freed me from the temptation of futile theorizing. The conviction that knowledge of the truth can only be found in life made me doubt the rightness of my own way of life. But the thing that saved me was that I managed to tear myself away from my exclusiveness and see the true life of the simple working people, and realize that this alone is genuine life. I realized that if I wanted to understand life and its meaning I had to live a genuine life and not that of a parasite; and having accepted the meaning given it by true mankind and having merged myself with this life, to test it.

At this time the following happened to me: over the course of a whole year, almost every minute I asked myself whether I had not better kill myself with a rope or a bullet. And at the same time as I was experiencing the thoughts and observations I have described, my heart was agonized by a tormenting feeling. I can only describe this feeling as a quest for God.

I say that this quest for God was not a debate but an emotion because it did not arise from my stream of thoughts – it was in fact quite contrary to them – but from my heart. It was a feeling of fear, abandonment, loneliness, amid all that was strange to me, and a sense of hope that someone would help me.

Despite the fact that I was utterly convinced of the impossibility of proving the existence of a God (Kant had shown me this and I had fully understood that it cannot be proven), I nevertheless searched for God in the hope that I might find Him, and reverting to an old habit of prayer, I prayed to Him whom I sought but could not find. In my mind I went over the arguments of Kant and Schopenhauer on the impossibility of proving the existence of God, and I began to refute them. Cause, I told myself, does not belong to the same category of thought as space and time. If I exist then there must be a cause, and a cause of the cause. And the cause of everything is that which we call God. I dwelled on this thought and tried with my whole being to recognize the presence of this cause. And as soon as I recognized that there is a force with power over me I immediately felt the possibility of life. But I asked

myself: 'What is this cause, this force? How should I think about it? How should I relate to this thing I call God?' But only the familiar answers came into my head: 'He is the creator, He is omniscient.' The answers did not satisfy me and I felt that I still lacked something inside me that is necessary in order to live. I fell into a state of panic and started to pray to the one whom I sought, in order that He might help me. And the more I prayed the more apparent it became that He did not hear me and that there was really no one to whom I could turn. And with my heart full of grief that there was no one, no God, I cried: 'Lord have mercy on me. Save me! O Lord show me the way!' But no one had mercy on me and I felt that my life had come to an end.

Yet time and again, from different approaches, I kept coming to the same conclusion, that I could not have come into the world without any cause, reason, or meaning; that I could not be the fledgling fallen from the nest that I felt myself to be. If I lie on my back crying in the tall grass, like a fledgling, it is because I know that my mother brought me into the world, kept me warm, fed me and loved me. But where is she, that mother? If I am abandoned, then who has abandoned me? I cannot hide myself from the fact that someone who loved me gave birth to me. Who is this someone? Again, God.

'He knows and sees my searching, despair, struggle. He does exist,' I told myself. And I had only to recognize this for an instant and life would rise up within me and I would feel the possibility and joy of living. But again, from the recognition of the existence of God, I moved on to search for my relationship to Him, and again I was presented with that God, our Creator, in three persons, who sent us His son, our Saviour. And again, that God, separated from me and the world, would melt like ice before my eyes, and once more there was nothing left and my flicker of life was extinguished. I fell into despair and felt that there was nothing else I could do except kill myself. And worst of all was that I did not even feel I could do that.

Not two or three, but tens of hundreds of times, my mood suddenly changed from joy and animation to despair and a consciousness of the impossibility of living.

I can remember once in early spring I found myself alone in the woods. I was

listening and concentrating my thoughts on the one thing I had been continuously thinking about over the last three years. Again I was searching for God.

‘Fine then,’ I said to myself, ‘so there is no God, other than something I imagine and the only reality is my own life. There is no God and no miracle can prove that there is because it would only be part of my imagination, and would be irrational.’

‘But what about my concept of God, of He whom I seek?’ I asked myself, ‘Where does this concept come from?’ Once again, confronted with these thoughts, joyous waves of life surged up within me. Everything around me came to life and took on meaning. But my joy did not last long. My mind continued its work. ‘A concept of God is not God,’ I told myself. ‘A concept of God is something within me that I can either evoke or not evoke. It is not this that I am seeking. I am seeking that, without which there cannot be life.’ Once again everything within and around me began to die, and again I wanted to kill myself.

But then I stopped and looked at myself and at what was going on inside me. I recalled the hundreds of occasions when life had died within me only to be reborn. I remembered that I only lived during those times when I believed in God. Then, as now, I said to myself: I only have to know of God and I live; I only have to forget him and I die. What is this dying and coming to life again? It is clear that I do not live when I lose belief in God’s existence, clearly I would have killed myself long ago if I did not have a dim hope of finding Him. I live truly only when I am conscious of Him and seek Him. What then is it you are seeking? a voice exclaimed inside me. There He is! He, without whom it is impossible to live. To know God and to live are one and the same thing. God is life.

‘Live in search of God and there will be no life without God!’ And more powerfully than ever before everything within and around me came to light, and the light has not deserted me since.

And I was saved from suicide. When and how this change occurred in me I

could not say. Just as the life force within me was extinguished gradually and imperceptibly, and I came upon the impossibility of life, the cessation of life and the need for suicide, so too did this life force return to me, gradually and imperceptibly. And, strangely, the life force that returned to me was not a new one but the same old one that had attracted me during the early period of my life. I returned to all those things that had been part of my childhood and youth. I returned to a belief in that will that had given birth to me and which asked something of me. I returned to the idea that the single most important aim of my life is to improve myself, that is, to live according to this will. I returned to the conviction that I could find the manifestation of this will in something that had been hidden from me for a long time, in what humanity had worked out long ago for its own guidance. In other words I returned to a belief in God, in moral perfection, and in ordinance that handed down the meaning of life. Only the difference now was that whereas before I had accepted all this unconsciously, I now knew that I could not live without it.

There happened to me something like this: without remembering when I had been put into it, I found myself in a boat that had set off from some unknown shore. The direction to the opposite shore was shown to me, oars were put into my inexperienced hands, and I was left alone. I rowed as best I could and moved forwards, but the further I rowed towards the centre of the stream, the faster the current became that was carrying me directly away from my object, and I kept meeting more oarsmen like myself, who were being carried away by the current. There were lone oarsmen who continued to row; there were some who had discarded their oars; there were large rowing boats and enormous ships full of people, some struggling with the current, others abandoning themselves to it. And as I looked at the flow of those drifting downstream, I found that the more I rowed, the more I forgot the directions that had been given to me. In the very middle of the current, amid the crowd of boats and ships being pulled downstream, I lost my directions and abandoned my oars. From all directions people were being carried downstream by sail and oar, shouting for joy and assuring me and themselves that there could be no other direction. And I believed them and flowed with them. And I was carried a long way, so far that I could hear the noise of the rapids which were bound to shatter me, and I caught sight of boats that were already being smashed against them. Then I came to my senses. For a long

time I could not understand what had happened to me. I saw nothing ahead of me except the destruction towards which I was rushing, but which I feared, and I could see no salvation anywhere, and I did not know what to do. But looking behind me I saw countless boats that could not stop but were defiantly pushing against the current, and I remembered the oars and the direction of the shore, and I began to struggle back against the current, towards the shore.

The shore was God, the direction was ordinance, and the oars were the freedom given to me to row away towards the shore, to be united with God. In this way the force of life rose up within me and I started to live once again.

Chapter 13

I renounced the life of our class, having recognized that it is not life but only a resemblance of life, and that the conditions of luxury in which we live deprive us of the possibility of understanding life. I knew that in order to comprehend life I must understand the life not of the minority of those of us who are parasites, but of the simple working people, and of the meaning they give to life. The ordinary working people around me were the Russian people and it was to them that I turned, and to the meaning they give to life. This meaning, if it is possible to describe, is as follows. Every person comes into the world through the will of God. And God created man in such a way that each of us can either destroy his soul or save it. Man's purpose in life is to save his soul; in order to save his soul he must live according to God. In order to live according to God one must renounce all the comforts of life, work, be humble, suffer and be merciful. This is the meaning the people have derived from all the religious teaching that has been handed down and communicated to them by the pastors, and by the traditions that form part of their lives and are expressed in their legends, sayings and tales, and it was clear to me and close to my heart. But, together with this meaning rooted in the faith of the people, there was much that was inextricably bound to the non-sectarian people among whom I lived, which revolted me and which I found incomprehensible: the sacraments, the church services, the fasts, the bowing before relics and icons. The people could not separate one thing from another, and neither could I. However strange I found much of what went on in the people's faith, I accepted all of it, attended services, prayed morning and evening, fasted, received communion, and for the first time my reason did not oppose anything. The very thing I had formerly found impossible now provoked no opposition.

My attitude to faith was now quite different from what it had been before. Previously life itself had seemed to me full of meaning and faith, as the arbitrary affirmation of some irrational propositions, seemed absolutely superfluous as far as I was concerned and with no connection to life. At that time I asked myself what meaning these propositions could have and,

convinced that they had none, I threw them aside. Now, on the contrary, I knew very well that my life has, and could have, no meaning. And not only did the tenets of faith cease to appear unnecessary to me, but I was led by indisputable experience to the conviction that it was only these tenets that can give meaning to life. I had formerly looked upon them as completely superfluous hieroglyphics but now, even if I knew that I did not understand them, I knew there was meaning in them, and I told myself that I must learn to understand them.

I reasoned as follows. I told myself: The knowledge of faith arises, like all of mankind with its reason, from a mysterious source. This source is God, the origin of the human mind and body. Just as my body has succeeded to me from God, so too has my reason and my comprehension of life; therefore the stages in the development of this comprehension cannot be false. Those things in which people sincerely believe must be the truth. It may be expressed in various ways but it cannot be a lie. Therefore if I think it is a lie, it can only mean that I do not understand it. And I also said to myself: the essence of any faith consists in giving a meaning to life that will not perish with death. Faith must provide answers to the questions of a Tsar dying in the midst of luxury, an old serf worn out by work, an ignorant child, a wise old man, a half-witted old lady, a happy young woman, and a youth racked with passion. And so, if it is to answer to people living in the most differing circumstances of life and of different education, and if there is only one answer to the eternal questions of life – why do I live? what is the purpose of my life? – this answer, although essentially always the same, must be endlessly varied in its manifestation. The more unique, sincere and profound the answer, the more strange and peculiar it will appear in attempts to give it expression, depending on the education and circumstances of each individual. But these debates, while justifying much that was strange to me about the ritualistic aspects of religion, were nevertheless insufficient to enable me to perform acts I felt dubious about, particularly when it came to the faith that had become the sole concern of my life. With all the powers of my being I wished to be in a position whereby I could merge with the people in fulfilling the ritual aspects of their faith; but I could not do it. I felt that I would be lying to myself, and mocking what I considered sacred, if I were to do so. But at this point some new Russian theological works came to my aid.

According to the explanations of these theologians, the basic dogma of faith is the infallibility of the Church. The truth of everything the Church professes follows from this dogma as a necessary conclusion. The Church, as an assembly of believers, united in love and therefore possessing the truth, became the basis of my faith. I told myself that religious truth cannot be attained by one man alone, but only reveals itself to a union of all people, united through love. In order for the truth to be attained there must be no separation; and for there to be no separation we must love and make peace with those who are not in agreement with us. Truth manifests itself as love, and therefore if you do not respect the rituals of the Church you destroy love. And in destroying love you deprive yourself of the possibility of knowing the truth. At the time I did not see the sophistry of this argument. I did not see that unity in love can reveal the greatest love but never the divine truth as expressed in the definitive words of the Nicene Creed. I failed to see that love can never make a given expression of the truth a compulsory condition of unity. At the time I did not see the flaws in the argument, and thanks to it I was able to accept and fulfill all the rites of the Orthodox Church without understanding the majority of them. At the time I tried with my whole soul to avoid any arguments or contradictions, and attempted to explain those doctrines of the Church with which I was in conflict as rationally as possible.

In fulfilling the church rituals I subdued my reason and submitted myself to a tradition shared by all mankind. I united myself with my ancestors and loved ones, with my father and mother, and grandfather and grandmother. They and all who came before them had believed and lived, and they had brought me into the world. And I joined those millions whom I so admired. Nor was there anything wrong in these acts in themselves (by wrong I mean the indulgence of desire). As I rose early in the morning to go to church I knew that I was doing something good, if only in that I was sacrificing my bodily comforts in order to subdue my proud mind, for the sake of unity with my ancestors and contemporaries, and of finding the meaning of life. It was the same when I prepared for communion and said my daily prayers, making the sign of the cross and genuflecting, as too when I fasted. However insignificant these sacrifices were, they were made for the sake of something good. I prepared for communion, I fasted and said the prayers at the appointed times at home and in church. While listening to the church services I paused at each word

and whenever I could I gave it meaning. In the liturgy the most significant words for me were: 'Love one another in unity.' But further on I ignored the words: 'We believe in the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost', because I could not understand them.

Chapter 14

At the time it was so essential for me to believe in order to live that I subconsciously hid from myself the contradictions and obscurities in the religious dogma. But there was a limit to the amount of meaning that could be read into the rituals. If the most important words of the Ectene¹⁴ became increasingly clear to me, and even if I somehow managed to interpret the words: ‘And remembering Our Sovereign Lady, Holy Mother of God, and all the saints, ourselves and one another, let us all devote our entire life to Christ, Our Lord’; and even if I interpreted the frequent repetition of prayers for the Tsar and his family by the fact that they are more exposed to temptation than others, and therefore in greater need of prayer, and the prayers for the subjugation of our enemies and adversaries by saying that they are evil, nevertheless these prayers and others, such as the Hymn of the Cherubim, the Chosen Warriors, as well as the whole sacrament of the Eucharist, in fact nearly two thirds of the service, if not all of it, had no meaning or made me feel that in giving it meaning I was lying and thereby destroying my relation to God and losing all possibility of faith.

I experienced the same thing over the celebration of the major feasts. I could understand the law of observing the Sabbath, in other words devoting one day to God. But the most important feast was in memory of the Resurrection, the reality of which I could neither imagine nor understand. And the name ‘Resurrection’ was also given to the weekly feast day. On this day the sacrament of the Eucharist was performed, which I found quite incomprehensible. All the other twelve feast days, except for Christmas, were in memory of miracles – things which I endeavored not to think about, in order not to deny them: the Ascension, Pentecost, the Epiphany, the Intercession of the Virgin, and so on. At the celebration of these festivals, feeling that an importance had been ascribed to things I considered to be of little importance, I either invented something that would suffice as an explanation, or closed my eyes so that I would not see the things that tempted me.

This happened to me more powerfully than ever when I participated in what

are the most usual, and regarded as the most important, sacraments: Baptism and Communion. Here I did not come into conflict with something incomprehensible but with fully comprehensible acts; it seemed to me that these acts were seductive and I found myself in a dilemma – either I rejected them, or I lied about them.

I shall never forget the tormenting feeling that I experienced on the day I received communion for the first time in many years. The service, the priest, the rules of prayer, were all something I could understand, and created in me a joyful realization that the meaning of life was being revealed. The communion itself I interpreted as an act performed in memory of Christ, signifying the purification of sin and the full acceptance of Christ's teachings. If this explanation was artificial I failed to notice its falsity. As I bowed down and humbled myself before the confessor, a simple, timid priest, I felt so happy to be shaking loose all the dirt in my soul, repenting all my sins, so happy to be united in thought with the aspirations of the Fathers who had written the prayers of the office, so happy to be united with all those who have and who do believe, that I failed to notice the artificiality of my interpretations. But when I approached the Royal Doors and the priest asked me to repeat what I believe, and that what I was about to receive was actually the body and blood, my heart contracted; it was more than a false note, it was a cruel demand made by someone who evidently had never known what faith is.

I can now permit myself to say that it was a cruel demand, but at the time I did not think so; it was just horribly painful to me. I was no longer in the position I had been in during my youth, when I thought that everything in life was lucid. I had come to faith because apart from it I had found nothing, absolutely nothing, other than destruction; it was therefore impossible to give up the faith, and so I submitted. I discovered in my soul a feeling that helped me to endure it. It was a sense of self-abasement and humility. I humbled myself and swallowed the body and blood without feeling any sense of blasphemy, and with the desire to believe; but the blow had already struck. Knowing in advance what awaited me I could not do it a second time.

I nevertheless continued to perform the church rituals, and I still believed that

the truth lay in the dogma I was following. Then something happened to me which is clear to me now, but which struck me as strange at the time.

I was listening to the conversation of an illiterate peasant, a pilgrim, speaking about God, religion, life and salvation when a knowledge of faith was opened up to me. I drew closer to the people and, as I listened to their debates on life and religion, I found myself coming closer and closer to an understanding of the truth. The same thing happened to me when I read the Lives of the Martyrs and the Prologues, which became my favourite reading. Disregarding the miracles and thinking of them as fables expressing ideas, this reading revealed to me the meaning of life. There were the lives of Macarius the Great, Joseph the Prince (the story of Buddha), the writings of John Chrysostom, the story of the traveler in the well, of the monk who found gold, of Peter the Publican and the histories of the martyrs, all of whom proclaimed that death does not obliterate life; and there were the tales of illiterate and stupid men who found salvation, although they knew nothing about the teachings of the Church.

But I only had to meet educated believers or take up their books to find some doubts in myself rise up in me with dissatisfaction and an angry desire for argument, and I felt that the deeper I entered into their words, the further I went from the truth and walked toward the abyss.

Chapter 15

I so often envied the peasants their illiteracy and lack of learning. They found nothing false in those doctrinal statements which seemed apparent rubbish to me. They could accept them and believe in the truth, in the same truth that I believed in. Only for me, wretched fellow, it was obvious that the truth was interwoven with fine threads of falsehood, and that I could not accept it as such.

Thus I lived for about three years and in the early days when, as a catechumen, I was gradually acquiring the truth, scenting out the direction that seemed the clearest, these conflicts struck me less. When I failed to understand something I told myself: 'I am guilty, I am a fool.' But the more I became infused with the truths I was studying, the more they became the basis of my life, the more burdensome and irritating these obstacles became, and the sharper the division between what I did not understand and what I could never understand except by lying to myself.

Despite the doubts and sufferings I still clung to the Orthodox Church. But questions of life that had to be resolved kept rising to the surface, and the Church's ruling on these issues – contrary to the very foundations of faith by which I lived – finally obliged me to renounce the possibility of communion with Orthodoxy. First and foremost these issues concerned the attitude of the Orthodox Church to other Churches, to the Catholics and the so-called Raskolniks. At the time, as a result of my interest in religion, I had come into contact with believers of various denominations: Catholics, Protestants, Old Believers, Molokans, and others. Among them I met many deeply moral men with sincere belief. I wished to be a brother to these people. And what happened? The teaching which had promised me unity of all through one faith and through love, that very teaching, speaking through its highest representatives, told me that all these people were living a lie, that the thing which gave them strength of life was a temptation of the devil, and that it is we alone who are in possession of the only possible truth. And I saw that the Orthodox Church regarded as heretics all those who did not profess an identical faith to theirs, just as the Catholics and the others consider the

Orthodox followers to be heretics. And I saw that the Orthodox, although they may try to hide it, regard with hostility all those who do not practise their faith by using the same external symbols and words as themselves. And this could not be otherwise, first of all because the assertion that you live in falsehood and I in truth is the most cruel thing that one man can say to another and secondly, because a man who loves his children and his brothers cannot help feeling hostile towards those who want to convert his children and his brothers to a false belief. And this hostility increases in proportion to one's knowledge of theology. And assuming that truth lies in union by love, I was struck by the fact that theology was destroying the thing it should be advancing.

This temptation is obvious to educated men like ourselves who live in countries where a variety of different faiths are practised and who have seen the contemptuous, self-righteous, invincible manner of rejection with which the Catholics behave towards the Orthodox and the Protestants, and the Orthodox towards the Catholics and Protestants, and the Protestants towards them both. And there is such a similar attitude between the Old Believers, Russian Evangelists, Shakers and all the other religions, that the very obviousness of the temptation initially perplexed me. I told myself: no, it cannot be so simple. Surely if men fail to see that if their two convictions contradict each other, then neither of them possesses the sole truth that constitutes faith. There is something else here, there must be an explanation. I felt sure there was and I searched for the explanation, reading everything I could on the subject and consulting everyone I could. But I received no explanation other than the one according to which the Sumsky Hussars consider themselves to be the finest regiment in the world, while the Yellow Uhlans consider that they are the best regiment in the world. The ecclesiastics of all the different religious denominations, through their finest representatives, could tell me nothing except that they believed themselves to be in possession of the truth whilst others had strayed from it and that all they could do was to pray for them. I visited archimandrites, bishops, elder monks and monks of the strictest orders, yet none of them made any attempt to elucidate the matter for me. Only one explained it to me, but in such a way that I never asked anyone again.

I have already said that for every non-believer who returns to the faith (and this could include all of our younger generation), the question that first presents itself is: why is the truth not to be found in Lutheranism, or Catholicism, but only in the Orthodox faith? Someone who has been educated at secondary school cannot help knowing what the peasant does not know – namely, that the Protestants and Catholics are equally convinced of the singular truth of their faiths. Historical evidence, twisted by each religion to suit its own purpose, is insufficient. Is it not possible, as I have suggested, to understand the teachings in a superior way, so that from an elevated level the differences might disappear, as they do for people who genuinely believe? Is it not possible to go further along that path which we are following with the Old Believers? They stress the fact that their cross, their allelujahs, and their way of processing around the altar differ from ours. We say: you believe in the Nicene Creed and in the seven sacraments, and so do we. Let us keep to that and for the rest you may do as you please. Thus we have united with them by placing the essential aspects of faith above the non-essential. Is it not possible to say to the Catholics: you believe in such and such and so and so, which are the important things, as for the issue of the filioque and the Pope, you may do as you please. And can we not say the same to the Protestants and unite with them in the more important issues? My interlocutor agreed with my ideas, but told me that such concessions would provoke criticism from the spiritual authorities in that it suggests a departure from the faith of our ancestors and would lead to a schism, and that the vocation of the clergy is to safeguard, in all its purity, the Greek Orthodox faith that has been handed down by our forefathers.

Then I understood it all. While I am seeking faith, the force of life, they are seeking the best way of fulfilling, in the eyes of men, certain human obligations. And in fulfilling these human affairs they perform them in a human fashion. However much they might speak about their compassion for their lost brethren, or of their prayers for those who stand before the throne of the Almighty, it has always been necessary to use force in carrying out human duties. Just as it has always been applied, so it is now, and always will be. If two religions each consider that they hold the truth and the other a lie, then in order to convert their brothers to the truth they will each preach their own doctrines. And if a false doctrine is taught to the inexperienced sons of

the Church which holds the truth, then that Church will have no choice other than to burn the books and banish the person who is leading his sons into temptation. What can be done with a sectarian who, in the eyes of the Orthodox Church, is ablaze with the fire of false doctrine, and who is misleading the sons of the Church in the most important matter of life, in faith? What can be done with him other than chop off his head or imprison him? Under the Tsar, Alexis Mikhailovitch, they were burned at the stake; in other words, the severest method of punishment of the time was enforced. In our day too the severest method of punishment is enforced: imprisonment in solitary confinement. As I turned my attention to what is done in the name of religion I was horrified and very nearly repudiated Orthodoxy. A further thing was the Church's attitude to life with regard to war and executions.

At the time Russia was at war. And, in the name of Christian love, Russians were killing their fellow men. It was impossible not to think about this. It was impossible to avoid the fact that killing is evil and contrary to the most basic principles of any faith. And yet prayers were said in the churches for the success of our armies, and our religious teachers acknowledged this killing as an outcome of faith. And this was not only applied to murder in time of war, but, during the troubled times that followed the war, I witnessed members of the Church, her teachers, monks, and ascetics condoning the killing of helpless, lost youths. As I turned my attention to all that is done by people who profess Christianity, I was horrified.

Chapter 16

I no longer had any doubts and was fully convinced that in that faith which I joined not everything was truth. Whereas before I used to say that all religious teaching is a lie, now I could not say this. There could be no doubt that the ordinary people had a knowledge of the truth, otherwise they couldn't have lived. Moreover, this knowledge of the truth was now accessible to me; I had already lived by it and felt its validity. But there was falsehood in it as well, of this I had no doubt. All that had hitherto repelled me now stood vividly before me. Although I could see that the mixture of lies I so loathed was less apparent among the peasants than among the representatives of the Church, I could nevertheless see that even in the people's faith there was falsehood mixed with the truth.

But where did the falsehood come from, and where did the truth come from? Both had been passed down by what is called the Church. But falsehood and truth are contained in tradition, in the so-called holy tradition and in the holy writ.

Whether I liked it or not, I was led to study and examine these writings and traditions – an examination that until now I had been very fearful of.

I turned to a study of that very theology I had once so contemptuously rejected as unnecessary. Then it had seemed to me a series of superfluous nonsense, then I had been surrounded on all sides by manifestations of life that I found clear and full of meaning; now I would have been glad to reject anything that didn't fit into a healthy mind, but I did not have another choice. The one meaning of life that had been revealed to me rests on this religious doctrine, or is at least inseparably connected. However far-fetched it might seem to my old, infirm mind, it was the only hope of salvation. It must be carefully and attentively examined in order to be understood, even if it is not understood in the way I understand the propositions of science. I do not seek that, nor can I, since I know the unusual nature of religious knowledge. I shall not seek the explanation of everything. I know that the explanation of all things, like the origin of all things, must remain a secret of eternity. But I

want to understand in such a way as to be led to what has to be inevitably inexplicable: I want everything inexplicable to be so not because the demands of my intellect are wrong (they are right and I cannot understand anything without them) but because I see the limitations of my intellect. I want to understand in such a way that everything inexplicable presents itself to me as being necessarily inexplicable and not as being something that I am under an obligation to believe.

I have no doubt that there is truth in the teachings, but I also have no doubt that there is falsehood in them too, and that I must discover what is true and what is false and separate one from the other. This is what I have set out to do. That which I found false in the teachings, and that which I found true, and the conclusions I came to, comprise the next part of this essay, which, if someone should consider it worthwhile and useful to people, will probably be published some day, somewhere.

1879

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I wrote the above three years ago.

The other day, while I was re-reading this printed section and returning to the train of thoughts and feelings that were inside me when I was experiencing all this, I had a dream. This dream expressed for me, in condensed form, all that I had lived through and described, therefore I think that for those who have understood me a description of the dream will refresh, clarify and unify all that has been related at such length in these pages. Here is the dream:

I see that I am lying on a bed. I am neither comfortable, nor uncomfortable. I am lying on my back. But I start to think about whether or not I am comfortable and it seems to me that my legs are a bit awkward; I do not know whether it is that they are too short or that they are uneven. I shift my legs and at the same time I begin to think about the way I am lying and what I am lying on, things which had not entered my head until now. And looking at my bed I see that I am lying on some plaited rope supports that are attached to the sides of the bed. My feet are resting on one of the supports, my calves on

another and my legs are uncomfortable. I somehow know that these supports can be moved. Moving one of my legs I push away the furthest support beneath my feet. I presume that this will be better. But I have pushed it too far and want to rescue it with my legs, and this movement causes yet another support, beneath my calves, to fall off and my calves are left dangling. I move my whole body in order to adjust my position and am quite certain that this will settle the matter. But with this movement still more of the supports slip and move away beneath me and I can see that things are getting worse: the whole lower part of my body is slipping and hanging down, and my feet do not reach the ground. I am only supported on the upper half of my back and I start to feel not just uncomfortable but terrified of something. Only at this point do I ask myself the thing that has not yet entered my head. I ask myself: where am I and what am I lying on? I begin looking around and before anywhere else I look beneath me, where my body is dangling and in the direction where I feel I am bound to fall very soon. I look below, and I cannot believe my eyes. I am at a height not just of, say, an extremely tall tower or mountain, but I am at a height such as I could never have imagined.

I cannot even discern whether I can see anything there below, in the bottomless abyss over which I am hanging and into which I am being drawn. My heart contracts and I feel terrified. It is dreadful to look down there. I feel that if I look down I will immediately slip from the last support and perish. I do not look, but not looking is still worse because I am thinking about what is going to happen to me when I slip from the last support. And I feel that I am losing my last bit of strength through terror, and that my back is slowly slipping lower and lower. Another moment and I will fall off. And then I have a thought: perhaps it is not real. It is a dream. I will wake up. I try to wake up and cannot. 'What can I do, what can I do?' I ask myself, looking upwards. Above there is also an abyss. I look into this abyss of sky and try to forget about the abyss below, and I do in fact forget it. The infinity below repels and frightens me; the infinity above attracts and reassures me. Thus I am hanging over the abyss, held up by the last of the supports that has not yet slipped out from under me; I know that I am dangling but I only look upwards and my fear passes away. As happens in a dream, a voice says: 'Take note of this, this is it!' I look further and further into the infinity above me and feel myself growing calmer. I remember everything that has

happened and how it happened: how I shifted the position of my legs, how I was dangling there, how terrified I felt, and how I was saved from my terror by looking upwards. And I asked myself: 'Am I not still dangling there?' And I do not look around so much as feel with my whole body the edge of the support by which I am held up. I see that I am no longer dangling or falling but am firmly supported. I ask myself how I am being supported: I grope about, look around and see that beneath me, under the middle of my body, there is a single support and when I look up I am lying on it in a position of secure balance, and that it alone gave me support before. And then, as happens in dreams, the mechanism by which I am supported seems to me to be a very natural, comprehensible and sure thing, although when awake it makes no sense at all. I am even surprised, in my sleep, that I had not understood this before. It appears that there is a pillar at my head and the solidity of this slender pillar is beyond doubt, although there is nothing for it to stand on. A rope is hanging very ingeniously, yet simply, from the pillar, and if one lies with the middle of one's body on the rope and looks up there can be no question of falling. This was all clear to me and I was glad and tranquil. It was as if someone were saying to me: 'Make sure you remember.' And I woke up.